

The Theology of the Book of Hebrews

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1. Introduction

The book of Hebrews is a homily, a “word of exhortation” as the author expresses himself. (13:22; cf. Acts 13:15) Concerning authorship the epistle remains silent. Though traditionally Paul the Apostle is in view, chapter 2 seems to exclude him since the writer here does not consider himself being one of the apostles as Paul emphasizes his position elsewhere. (2:1.3; cf. Gal 1:16; 2:7) Other names remain speculative.

In regard to its audience, scholars tend to conclude that the author wrote to Jewish Christians living in first-century Rome. The argument of Hebrews is based on Old Testament exegesis with the purpose of showing the finality of the gospel in contrast to Judaism. Gentile Christians were unlikely familiar enough with the Scriptures and were not in danger of falling back to the old Judaistic order, particularly to the institution of Levitical priesthood. (Bruce 1990, 6) Since “those who come from Italy” (13:24) send greetings we can assume that Jewish Christians living in Rome are addressed. They were persecuted not yet to the point of martyrdom (12:4), which sets a reasonable date before the Neronian persecution of A.D. 65.

Structural analysis divides the epistle essentially into two parts. The author first exposes the doctrine of the person and work of Christ (1:1-10:18) and then exhorts the reader to respond to the doctrine with faithful perseverance (10:19-13:25). We will thus study first the Christology of Hebrews and then its exhortations.

2. Christology

A. Son of God

The Sonship of Christ is magnificently brought out in the epistle from the very beginning. The first two verses introduce the Son of God succeeding the prophets of the past. “In these last days” God has spoken not through the prophets but by his Son. (1:2) God’s revelation in salvation-history “reaches its goal in the person of One who is no less than a Son.” (Harrison 1964, 333) The Christianity of the New Testament is final and superior to the Judaism of the Old Testament because of the Son himself who is superior to all. He is the final, even incarnate, Word of God.

Verses 2b- 4 give us seven descriptions about the Son that are skillfully arranged around his exaltation. The epistle says that the Son is...

...appointed heir of all things (1:2b)

...maker of the universe (1:2c)

...the radiance of God’s glory and representation of his being (1:3a)

...sustaining all things by his word (1:3b)

...the provider of purification for sins (1:3c)

...sitting at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven (1:3d)

...superior to angels as the name he has inherited (1:4)

The list reveals three stages of Sonship. (cf. Fanning 1994, 370) Above all, the Son is preexistent and eternal. He is the maker of the universe (1:2c) and thus existed prior to all ages. God's agent in creation is the 'builder of the house' who is superior to everyone and everything that belongs to the house itself. (cf. 3:3) His divine status is implied here but explicitly taught in verse 3a. The Son of God created all things, inherits all things (1:2b) and sustains all things (1:3b). He is God eternal, "the same yesterday and today and forever." (13:8)

As the incarnate Son he entered into human life and provided "purification for sins." (1:3c) With reference to Psalm 8 the author shows how the Son "secures the fulfillment of the God-given dominion for humanity" through his incarnation and suffering. (Fanning 1994, 378; cf. 2:5-9) By suffering he learned obedience and was made perfect. (cf. 2:10b; 5:9) His perfect self-sacrifice accomplished the work of redemption and established the new order according to God's plan.

Finally, the Son is exalted and "sitting at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven." (1:3d) He is the "appointed heir of all things" (1:2b) and inherits a superior name (1:4). By citation of Psalm 45 and 110 the author shows that he is in line with the Old Testament teaching in this context. (cf. 1:8.13) Later Jesus is further portrayed as superior High Priest "at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven" (8:1), but first his exalted position is revealed by comparison to angels and to Moses.

The theme of superiority is closely connected to the theme of Sonship and already introduced in 1:4. He is “superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs.” The statement is an exposition summary of the Old Testament quotations that follow. Though angels were agents of the law-giving (2:2) and administrators over nations (2:5; cf. Dan 10:20-21; Eph 6:12), the Father does not call them ‘Son’ in the Scriptures. On the contrary, the angels worship the Son. (1:6b; cf. Ps 97:7; Deut 32:43 in the LXX) Though Jesus the representative of man was first made “lower than the angels,” he was then exalted and “crowned with glory” (2:7), so that eventually “it is not to angels that he has subjected the world to come” (2:5) but to man. Later in the epistle the reader is instructed not only to share in the glory but also in the preceding suffering of the Son. (cf. 2:10; 12:2)

That Jesus the Son, though he calls his men ‘brothers’ (2:11), is still superior to man as the creator is always and in every aspect superior to his creation is illustrated by comparison to Moses in 3:3-4. Just as Moses was faithful as a servant, Christ is faithful as the superior Son. (3:2.5-6) Now the reader is warned not to be unfaithful to Jesus like Israel was unfaithful to Moses. (cf. 3:16-19) If man was punished to reject the old revelation spoken by angels (2:2) and given to Moses (3:16-19), how can the reader escape if he rejects the gospel “spoken to us by his Son” (1:2) who is superior to all? Such is the foundational argument introduced at the outset of the epistle.

Jesus' divinity is often recalled and highlighted in the chapters that follow, e.g. by usage of 'Kyrios' either referring directly to Jesus (2:3; 7:14) or replacing 'God' in the Old Testament quotations (7:21; 8:8.11; 10:16.30). In 1:8, the Son is explicitly referred to as 'God' himself. Emphasis on his humanity is given by the frequent use of the human name 'Jesus.' (cf. Ladd 1993, 624) The theme of Jesus' High Priesthood combines the two strains of Jesus' divinity and humanity.

B. High Priest

The High Priesthood of Christ is the doctrinal center of Hebrews. Whereas the Sonship is basic for the argumentation, the Priesthood is the category that forms the distinctive theology of the epistle. (cf. MacLeod 1989, 292) The author himself supports this viewpoint: "The point of what we are saying is this: We do have such a high priest, who sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, and who serves in the sanctuary, the true tabernacle set up by the Lord, not by man." (8:1) The expression 'such a high priest' in this key verse points to the qualifications for true priesthood as taught in the Old Testament and exposed in the context of this verse. The reference goes back to Aaron first and then to Melchizedek.

In 5:1-4, the two qualifications for the Aaronic priesthood are set out: (a) sympathy for those the priest represents and (b) his divine appointment. (cf. Bruce

1990, 118ff.) The Aaronic priest is subject to weakness like all men, hence he is able to deal gently with the people he represents. (5:2) Jesus the 'true priest' meets the first qualification since he was made "perfect through suffering" (2:10; cf. 5:8f.) and so he was also made able to sympathize with his people. The author says elsewhere, "Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted." (2:18; cf. 4:15)

Aaron and his sons were further qualified by the divine calling "from among the Israelites ... to serve me as priests." (Ex 28:1) The second qualification is met by Jesus in his calling he got even before his incarnation. Above all, Psalm 2:7 is repeated to remind the reader that he is even called as the 'Son.' (5:5; cf. 1:5) The author proceeds with Psalm 110:4 that is applied to Jesus as messianic prophecy: "You are a priest for ever, in the order of Melchizedek." (5:6)

One of the most difficult questions for the Jewish Christian to answer was how Jesus the 'Son of David' could serve as priest since he was from the tribe of Judah. (cf. Heb 7:14) The surrounding nations had king-priests, but "in Israel the Davidic kings were of the tribe of Judah, while the priests were of the tribe of Levi. Only the descendants of Levi had the privilege to serve in the temple. Only the priests were allowed to enter into the holy place in the temple. So it seems that it was impossible for Israel to have a king who at the same time was a priest." (Paul 1987, 196)

The author of Hebrews provides the exegetical solution to the troubled mind of the reader. Long before the Levitical priesthood was established, Melchizedek was both “king of Salem and priest of God Most High.” (7:1; cf. Gen 14:18-20) Since he was “without genealogy” (7:3) and “did not trace his descent from Levi” (7:6), he must have been appointed priest by oath. In the same way, Jesus “became a priest with an oath.” (7:21f.) In this sense Jesus is priest ‘in the order of Melchizedek’ in fulfillment of Psalm 110:4. (Paul 1987, 205) The author continues his argument when he points out that Melchizedek was superior to the Levites, since “he collected a tenth from Abraham and blessed him” (7:6) and Levi was still in the body of his ancestor Abraham. (7:10) “And without doubt the lesser person is blessed by the greater.” (7:7) In conclusion, Jesus’ priesthood is superior to the Levitical priesthood as Melchizedek was superior to Abraham and his descendants, because he is a priest in this order.

Due to such superiority, the true priest “sets aside the first to establish the second.” (10:9b) Jesus ‘abolishes’ (*anairai*) the old Levitical priestly order and establishes the superior and final priesthood that gives Christians a ‘better hope’ (7:19), a ‘better covenant’ (7:22), ‘better promises’ (8:6), a ‘better sacrifice’ (9:23), ‘better possessions’ (10:34), a ‘better country’ (11:16) and a ‘better resurrection’ (11:35). (cf. 6:9; 7:7; 11:40; 12:24) In these last days, salvation-history has reached its end in the new and better covenant. The author reminds the reader of Jeremiah’s new covenant

prophecy (8:8b-12; cf. Jer 31:31-34) and concludes in 8:13a: “By calling this covenant ‘new’, he has made the first one obsolete.”

Whereas the old covenant had an earthly sanctuary (9:1), the ‘true priest’ serves in the ‘true tabernacle’ in heaven. (8:1) The Aaronic priest entered “only once in a year, and never without blood” (9:7), but Jesus entered “once for all by his own blood.” (9:12) Jesus did not enter the holy place repeatedly like Aaron but “sat down at the right hand of God.” (10:12) As Bruce puts it, “a seated priest is the guarantee of a finished work and an accepted sacrifice.” (Bruce 1990, 245) Jesus’ self-sacrifice purifies the conscience (9:14) and provides the full and eternal forgiveness for sins that the old animal sacrifices could not accomplish. (10:4.14-18) To sum up, Jesus’ priesthood is ‘permanent’ and ‘perfect.’ (7:24.28)

Sitting in the heavenly tabernacle, the appointed High Priest intercedes for his people with whom he sympathizes. (7:25; 9:24) Even more, he has opened up full access to God and the reader is encouraged to “approach the throne of grace with confidence.” (4:16; cf. 10:19-25) Not by Levitical priesthood but “through Christ’s atoning work alone may be found entrance into God’s presence.” (Ladd 1993, 623)

The argumentation as a whole is marked by a dualism between the heavenly world and the earthly world. The ‘true tabernacle’ in heaven is contrasted to the earthly sanctuary of the old priestly order. The latter is only “a copy and shadow of what is in

heaven.” (8:5) Jesus did not enter the copy but heaven itself. (9:23-24) The heavenly things are purified with ‘better sacrifices’, for even the law was only a shadow and the animal sacrifices could not make perfect. (9:23; 10:1ff.) Since Christians are made perfect through the sacrifice of the true priest (10:14) and therefore “have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus” (10:19), they are encouraged to persevere and move on towards maturity, holding to the hope they profess.

3. Christian Life

A. Perseverance

Whereas the doctrinal center of Hebrews is the priesthood of Christ, the central point of exhortation is a call to perseverance in faith and obedience. McKnight states that “the book is essentially a pastoral missive designed to appeal to the religious affections of these readers and to propel them onward toward a life of obedience, courage, and fidelity to God’s revelation in Christ (which is superior to the revelation of the former covenant).” (McKnight 1992, 32) The reader has to understand the doctrine only as foundational to the exhortation he should bear with. (cf. 13:22)

The original audience faced persecution and even death for the sake of their confession and thus they were in danger of falling back and losing their faith. (cf. 2:1; 10:39) Since they most likely were Jews, some were tempted to revert to Judaism.

Others were caught in spiritual lethargy and infancy. (5:11; 6:12) For pastoral reasons the author not only provides doctrinal insight together with a call towards maturity (6:1), but first and foremost he confronts the reader with five warning passages against apostasy. (2:1-4; 3:6-4:13; 5:11-6:12; 10:26-39; 12:12-29)

A synthesis of the warnings shows that the author addresses “believers in the fullest sense possible.” (McKnight 1992, 44) The sin he describes in various ways points to the one sin of apostasy. (3:12; 6:6; 10:26.29; 12:25) Essentially he exhorts his audience to persevere in faith no matter the cost, because the consequence of apostasy is eternal damnation. (McKnight 1992, 25ff.; cf. 10:26-31)

With such serious warnings in mind, the reader is encouraged in chapter 11 to follow the Old Testament examples of faith even up to the point of martyrdom. (11:35-38; 12:1) Climax of the argumentation is the call to consider the sufferings of Jesus himself. (12:1-3) He suffered and endured “for the joy set before him” (12:2) as did the models listed in chapter 11. (cf. 11:35.38) Such eschatological dualism goes along with a frequent reminder of the professed ‘hope.’ (3:6; 6:11.18; 10:23)

It is interesting that Hebrews argues with an emphasis on discontinuities (e.g. priesthood, covenant, sacrifices) but at the same time calls the reader to imitate the faith of the Old Testament models. The faith of the new covenant is the same kind of faith under the former covenant, and Christians have to persevere in such faith.

B. Holy Conduct

The call to follow the model's way of faith in chapter 11 brings the reader on the pilgrimage towards the promised land. Abraham obeyed and went, following God's guidance by faith (11:8-10), together with all the faithful people who "admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth." (11:13b) When the author teaches in chapter 3 and 4 about Israel's wandering in the desert and their failure to enter the promised land because of unbelief and disobedience (3:19; 4:11), he gives a negative example as a warning and ends with the exhortation to "make every effort to enter that rest" (4:7) meaning salvation. In sum, the reader is told not to stand still but to move on in faithful obedience. The call is towards maturity (6:1) and holiness (12:14).

On this way of salvation, Jesus is the Pioneer (*archegos*; 2:10; 12:2) and Forerunner (*prodomos*; 6:20), and the Christian is instructed to follow him. He is both the object and example of faith, the source of perfection (10:14) and the "Shepherd of the sheep." (13:20) The way brought out in Hebrews is the only way which eventually leads to the final salvation inaugurated in a believer's life on earth. (McKnight 1992, 57f.) In contrast, unbelief and the sin of apostasy lead to eternal damnation.

More practically, the author ends his epistle with a list of concrete instructions for the daily Christian life in his last chapter 13. The first three verses teach the love and

concern for ‘brothers’ and ‘fellow-prisoners’ and the hospitality even for ‘strangers.’ Already in 10:25 the author instructs the reader not to give up meeting together. Mutual service and encouragement is a virtue that helps the Christian to persevere on his way of faith. The list goes on with a calling for holy conduct in marriage (13:4) and warns the reader against the love of money (13:5-6). Finally, the models of ministry should be honored and imitated. (13:7; cf. 13:17) The instructions conclude with an admonition against “all kinds of strange teachings” (13:9) and a summarizing call to follow Jesus (13:13).

4. Conclusion

The epistle of Hebrews is as relevant for us today as it was for the original audience. Even if the average reader of the western world nowadays is neither Jewish nor facing persecution, Christians are walking the way of faith and are called to perseverance. The danger of apostasy is real. The book of Hebrews teaches that salvation is evidenced in perseverance that expresses itself in obedient faith. The theology of Hebrews in this regard is a rich complement and contribution to the Lord’s parable of the sower. (cf. Mt 13:3-8)

The source and center of salvation is the Lord himself, who is portrayed as the superior Son of God and High Priest who intercedes for his people like he has done in

John 17. Therefore, in sum, the reader is warned but even more encouraged to “approach the throne of grace with confidence” (4:16) and “to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus.” (10:19) If he lives according to this word of exhortation, he will enter the promised rest he hopes for.

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